

U.S. Savage Imperialism, Part 4

The U.S., the Mideast, and the world, part four of a talk at Z Media Institute

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By **Noam Chomsky**

This series began with the December 2010 issue of *Z Magazine*. Parts one and two featured the text of Chomsky's talk; parts three and four are transcriptions of the Q&A that followed.



ZMI STUDENT: *Do you think there should be a call for a national mobilization to fight climate change?*

CHOMSKY: The climate change issue is a striking demonstration of the lethal effects of markets. Markets have certain properties. We don't actually have a market society. It's kind of a semi-market society, for one reason because the corporate sector knows it can appeal to the state and the state will come along and save it when it gets into trouble. So it's a state capitalist economy, with functioning market principles. Suppose you're the CEO of an energy corporation—or in the Chamber of Commerce, the big business lobby—you have certain interests as part of your institutional role in a market system. You have to maximize short term profit. You don't have any choice. That means you have to ignore what economists call externalities—that is, the effect of a transaction on others.

The externalities in the case of the financial system are called systemic risk. If Goldman Sachs makes a transaction, assuming they're well-managed, they have to take into account their own welfare. What they don't and cannot take into account is the risk that the whole system will collapse. That's a virtual guarantee of financial crises. That's why they keep repeating over and over again and getting worse and worse. It's not a big secret. You learn it in the first term of Economics 101. In the

case of systemic risk, it's not an overwhelming problem because the powerful state will step in and rescue you and you'll end up being richer than before, as we've just seen.



Let's take climate change. The CEOs of corporations must follow the policy of ignoring externalities, which in this case happen to be the fate of the species. Not surprisingly, the people making those decisions are running huge propaganda campaigns to try to convince Americans that it's all a liberal hoax. They're trying to beat back any legislation that might do anything about it. Those same

people know that it's a serious risk, that it might destroy what they own and the lives of their grandchildren or maybe great-grandchildren. As human beings they know that, but as CEOs they have to forget it and keep to the market principle of ignoring externalities—in this case, the fate of the species.

That's what we're facing. That's why there isn't any legislation and there isn't any national campaign—and there won't be as long as we permit this element of the market system to function.

It seems to be getting more and more difficult to have any kind of resistance against Israel's policies. Do you think organized protests here are the best way to go?

Protests, yes. But there are other actions being taken beyond protests—for example, a boycott of production from the Occupied Territories, and a lot of people are doing that. But there's more that can be done. There is an international solidarity movement. There's a lot of very good, courageous people participating in it. Also, as you may know, Amnesty International, during the Gaza attack, came out with a report calling on the U.S. to terminate all arms shipments to Israel because they're illegal under international law. They could have added that they're illegal under U.S. law as well. You cannot provide arms to a country except for defensive purposes. As I mentioned earlier, these were not defensive purposes—therefore, U.S. arms to Israel are illegal under international and U.S. law. The solidarity movement could pick that up and call for an arms embargo in obedience to U.S.

law. That would be pretty serious for Israel. It would also be pretty serious for U.S. business—Lockheed Martin and the rest of them. One of the reasons they love Israel is because, whenever the U.S. provides \$3 billion in military aid to Israel, it goes into their pockets. Also, when they sell Israel advanced weaponry the rulers of the Gulf States say, "we want some too." It's like a teaser in a department store. Then Lockheed can send a huge amount of second rate military equipment to Saudi Arabia, which they can't do anything with. That's a lot of money coming back to U.S. businesses.

Calling an arms embargo against Israel—and Egypt, the second largest recipient of U.S. aid—makes a lot of sense.

How resistant is the U.S. to a nuclear weapons-free zone?

One of the main things that came out of the non-proliferation treaty conference in May was an international call for a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. If the U.S. had any interest in ending nuclear proliferation, if Obama believed a word he was saying, he would be calling for a nuclear weapons-free zone all over the world. It's not a complete solution to nuclear proliferation, but it's a pretty significant step.

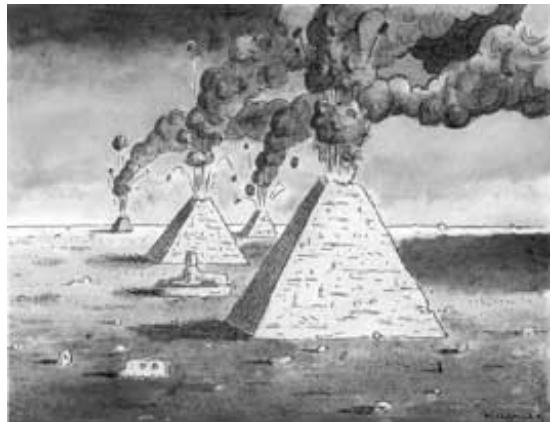
Instead, the U.S. is doing the exact opposite. In this case, the Administration was caught. It couldn't come out openly and say, "No, we don't want a nuclear weapons-free zone." So what they did was agree with the world and say, "Yes, we want a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East, but it has to wait until there's a comprehensive peace treaty." Okay, that means, until the Messiah comes because the U.S. can block a comprehensive peace treaty as it has been doing for the last 35 years. The U.S. further stated that it's not going to institute anything that either restricts Israel's nuclear activities or that calls upon major powers—meaning the U.S.—to reveal what they know about Israeli nuclear facilities.

It's worth bearing in mind that the U.S. and Britain have a unique commitment to a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East—for reasons that apparently can't be articulated. When the U.S. and Britain invaded Iraq, they tried to construct a thin legal cover by appealing to a UN Security Council Resolution from 1991—Resolution 687—which calls on Saddam Hussein to eliminate his weapons of mass destruction programs. That was the pretext for the invasion, which was pretty well exploded. What is of interest is that Article 14 of that resolution commits the

signers to establishing a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. That means the U.S. and Britain, over all other countries, are formally committed to this. But they can get away with ignoring this because the media and the educated classes keep quiet. But that doesn't mean we have to keep quiet. We can say, "You are committed to a nuclear weapons-free zone and your efforts to evade it cannot be tolerated."

If it was instituted, it would mitigate and perhaps even eliminate any possible threat that Iran might pose—not much of a threat, as I mentioned earlier. That would be a very positive step, but the U.S. is blocking it.

Remember that the Obama administration is blocking other nuclear weapons-free zones at the same time. This also doesn't get reported, but it's very important. Take Africa, for example. After many years of negotiations, it finally reached an agreement on a nuclear weapons-free zone. There's only one hang up. The U.S. won't allow it. Africa includes an island in the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia. It was a British territory. On U.S. orders, the British expelled the population and turned it into one of the main U.S. military bases. It's a military base the U.S. uses to bomb the Middle East and Central Asia. The U.S. stores nuclear weapons there, which will increase under the Obama administration. In fact, in December the Navy announced that it was sending a submarine tender to Diego Garcia to accommodate nuclear submarines with nuclear tipped missiles. Also, Obama announced that he is sending what are called bunker busters—the most lethal weapon in the arsenal of short-range nuclear weapons—designed for attacking Iran.



So the U.S. will not allow the African nuclear weapons-free zone because it wants to use it for nuclear weapons. The same thing is happening in the South Pacific. The South Pacific countries also reached an agreement on a nuclear weapons-free zone. At first it was blocked by France because it wanted to use its island possessions for testing nuclear weapons. After the French carried out those tests, the U.S. blocked it because the U.S. island possessions are being used for storing nuclear weapons for submarines.

The most important nuclear weapons-free zone is the Middle East and it's a major issue. There was a call after a non-proliferation treaty conference in May for a follow-up conference in 2012, I think, to focus on the issue. At that time, the U.S. is going to be in a bind because the entire world will be calling for a nuclear weapons-free zone, which would not only include Israel, but U.S. forces deployed to the region. Obama's new strategic posture, if you read it carefully, says the U.S. won't use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states—with an exception: Iran or anybody else in our way.

This is a major issue. Those who want to do something about nuclear proliferation should be focusing on this.

Do you support cultural and academic boycotts?

Only under special circumstances, for example, adherence to apartheid (in South Africa) or institutional participation in the occupation (by Israeli universities). In the case of Israel, there is also a serious tactical question. If you want to be serious about any action, you first have to ask yourself, "Am I carrying this out because I want to feel good or because I care about the victims?" Maybe the Weathermen in the 1960s felt good breaking windows, but that wasn't helping the Vietnamese. In fact, the Vietnamese didn't like it. What they wanted was peaceful demonstrations. But it felt good to break windows; it felt like they were doing something.

The same thing is true of this—forgetting all questions of principle. If you decide to boycott Tel Aviv University, why not boycott Harvard or MIT? They are guilty of far worse crimes. The hypocrisy is so blatant that it easily turns into a weapon for the most hard line elements—as has happened. If you're serious about activism, then you have to think seriously about tactics. You can't just follow them because they make you feel good, you have to follow them because it's going to help the victims, not harm them.

You've touched on environmental catastrophe. People are wondering what to do. Is it a technical problem that we need to solve or is it a social problem?

It's both. The details you can argue about, but there's hardly any serious doubt that anthropogenic climate change is taking place and that it could have a very serious effect. Probably the most far reaching technical problem is to find ways to use solar energy—the one ultimate renewable resource for energy on earth. I'm not

technically competent to judge the specific ideas that are being developed about it, but I know people in the engineering department at MIT who are serious scientists who think, for example, that it's feasible to put receptors in space that can provide solar energy without interference from the earth's atmosphere and to use microwaves and other techniques to get it to earth and distribute it. That, or something like it, will have to be part of the solution.



On the other hand, there are serious social problems. In the U.S., particularly, it's worth remembering that there have been massive social engineering projects since WWII to drive the economy toward inefficient use of fossil fuels. In fact, some major corporations were brought to court and fined for conspiracy.

The U.S. used to have a pretty efficient electrical rail system. You used to be able to get around New England, for example, by electric rail. Los Angeles, which is now a transportation monstrosity, had a very efficient electric rail system. All of these things were destroyed by very conscious state-corporate programs to drive the economy toward wasteful use of fossil fuels.

Another massive social engineering project was to drive the population out of the cities into the suburbs. I don't object to living in the suburbs, In fact, I do. But from the point of view of the economy, it's just crazy as it's now organized. You can't live in the suburbs without having two cars in a family.

There are also racist issues. For example, there was a proposal in the 1970s to extend the subway system out to the western suburbs of Boston where I live. This would have saved people a couple of hours of commuting time every day. But people—fairly progressive—apparently preferred to spend two hours fighting traffic jams rather than face the threat that some black kid from Dorchester might walk around their town center. So no subway. These social problems exist all over the country and they have to be dealt with. You cannot have a society geared to the maximum waste of fossil fuels and expect it to survive.

Is there any value in continuing convergence activism at the G-20 gathering and others like it?

I think it could be used to educate about what's called globalization. Globalization is an ideological notion not a descriptive one. The term means "international integration." The strongest proponents of international integration are the people who meet at the World Social Forum. These are people from all over the world from all walks of life who are interested in international integration.

They're called "anti-globalization." The reason is the terminology has been appropriated by the powerful. So for them globalization means investor rights agreements—NAFTA, for example. But we don't have to accept that. We should say, "We're the ones who favor globalization. We think international integration is a great thing, but it should be in the interest of people, not investors." I think G-20 demonstrations can press that message. It means attacking the propaganda system right at its core.

Could you speak a bit about the racist laws inside Israel?

That's a very interesting topic. The most extreme of them are the land laws inside Israel, which, in various ways, place about 90 percent of the country in the hands of an organization which is by law and by its contract with the State of Israel required to act solely in the interests of people "of Jewish race, religion, and origin." The organization, the Jewish National Front, is a tax-free institution in the U.S. No one's supposed to talk about this, but it's totally outrageous.

There is a civil libertarian movement in Israel, which finally, in 2000, managed to get the High Court in Israel to consider these laws. The Court concluded that they are untenable because you can't have a law that blocks 90 percent of the land from Arab and non-Jewish citizens. So they struck it down. It was in reference to a particular case where a middle class Arab family wanted to move into a Jewish town and the town rejected their application on the grounds of the land laws. Six years after the court decision, the family was allowed to move in. That's the only case I know of when the law's been applied.



The question of apartheid arises often in talking about the Occupied Territories. I

don't think it's the right term because it's much worse than apartheid. As I described at the beginning of my talk, they don't want Bantustans, they want people out. It's settler colonialism, getting rid of the indigenous population. The U.S. is the prime settler colonial society. Australia's another. Most imperialist countries leave the population there and try to rule over them and exploit them. Settler colonialism, the most savage kind, exterminates them.

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